

## Forest Refreshed

BRETT WESTWOOD

On December 1st 2021 I attended my first Wyre Forest Study Group field trip in Wyre Forest for over a year. It feels like a homecoming, a chance to re-connect with friends, human and otherwise.

December has never been my favourite month. These short pre-solstice days are usually cold, gloomy and damp. In the garden the last redundant male wasps are crawling woozily over the ivy. Butterflies are already distant memories. If I summon up enough enthusiasm to walk around the farmland near my home in Stourbridge, it is soon blunted when I struggle to find birds in a landscape whose hedges are battered by flails and field margins jaundiced with herbicides. A skylark nowadays is an event.

And so, it's only natural to want to return to the Forest, but the appeal of Wyre has tarnished during the past two years. "It's been a difficult time" I say to friends, "difficult" a euphemism for a complex knot of feelings I can't articulate. Nursing both my parents in their final illnesses, arranging for their transfer to a care home, selling off their house where they lived for over 50 years and dismantling the family business has been made even harder by the advent of Covid with its attendant lockdowns and isolation.

It's late 2020. I visit friends, when I am allowed to enter their houses and go for "daily exercise" when I'm not. My favourite haunts - Clent, Kinver Edge, Wyre Forest - are crowded with people with the same idea. Paths are churned into quagmires, dogs and mountain bikes seemingly everywhere. I drive past Callow Hill car park, as busy as a shopping mall, and worry that the Forest's wildlife will not be able to cope. We are told constantly by the media that getting out amongst nature will do us good, but I wonder how the natural world is being impacted. Suddenly my favourite haunts feel too small and vulnerable, their already threatened wildlife and habitats under siege. I resort to shadowing the River Stour within walking distance of home, but though there are surprises - a Little Egret fishing from a disused

car tyre, a meadow bristling with Dyer's Greenweed - it is no compensation for what I'm missing. As the year ends there's doubt about whether I can travel to Devon to see my family at Christmas, the hardest sacrifice of all. Things reach a low when I am refused permission to join five naturalist friends surveying the grounds of the Field Studies Council centre at Bishop's Wood, simply because I live in a different zone to them. After a year of loss, this feels cruel and unreasonable, a conspiracy to keep me away from the things I most value. I fire off a testy email to FSC even though I know they are following orders from on high. They are gracious and sympathetic in their reply which soothes me a little. I visit Plymouth and see my family and have an enjoyable Christmas.

2021 arrives with a new lockdown. Even though we can't meet for our annual Wyre Forest Study Group bird walk in January, several of us put in a solo effort and report back for the welcome NEWSLETTER which keeps us all in touch. I am still wary of entering Wyre, apprehensive that I'll react badly to off-leash dogs and off-route bikes. Slowly the year gathers pace and the strictures ease. Vaccinations bring greater freedom and when spring arrives, I venture farther afield. Now that we are allowed to mix more freely, I meet naturalist friends again. Rosemary Winnall and I watch newly-emerged Club-tailed Dragonflies at Bewdley and in the Teme valley we picnic among zooming Long-horned Bees. In July John and Denise Bingham and I visit Burlish Meadows, where we lure clearwing moths. Later in the year, we explore Titterstone Cleve Hill and track down Mountain Male Fern and Bilberry Bumblebee. Earlier, the same location had hosted a joint meeting with WFSG and Shropshire's Joy of Wildlife group, where over thirty of us explored the quarries beneath the gaze of circling Red Kites, a day memorable not only for its wildlife, but for the chance for so many of us to gather together. I make solo trips too, most memorably in mid-June to Croft Castle where at long last, I spot my



Mountainbike erosion near Coopers Mill

Brett Westwood



Lemon Slug *Malacolimax tenellus*

Rosemary Winnall



# Wyre Forest Study Group

first Western Bee-fly, a ghostly-pale fuzz-ball hovering along a forest ride.

By August more of us are meeting to establish new routines of vaccine-protected distancing. With Worcestershire Recorders I survey Dropping Well Farm newly-acquired by Worcestershire Wildlife Trust. In early November there is a WFSG botanising session in Kidderminster organised by Marian Davidson. I'm very partial to this kind of urban safari, a chance to pore over bracts and tepals while traffic roars past and shoppers give us strange looks: we even enjoy an *al fresco* riverside meal afterwards. At the end of the month, Entomology Day resumes, another very successful event and a key stepping-stone along the path to the "new normal". To see over seventy enthusiasts back together in one room is heart-warming.

But I have still not been back to Wyre. Will it be over-run with visitors, will the paths be wider, the car-parks fuller? Will I feel a stranger here after such a long absence? The last twelve months has felt like breaking faith.

And so on the first day of December I have some misgivings as I pull into the car-park at Hawkbatch to meet our event leader Rosemary Winnall and a dozen hardy souls who have ventured out on a windy, but sunlit day to search for fungi and soil invertebrates. We plod through sombre conifer plantations and spend time fossicking along the pipeline, our voices raised to compete with the stump-grinding machinery nearby. So far my concerns feel justified.

But soon we take a small birch-lined path and head for the lookout over Trimpley reservoirs where Goosanders loaf on the grey waters far below. As we eat our lunch, we chat about recent findings and something in me begins to relax. This is how things used to be pre-pandemic, a bevy of like-minded friends savouring a day out in the heart of the Forest.

Our picnics eaten; we search under the oaks among sheaves of woodrush where Rosemary Hill unearths a magnificent, golden Lemon Slug grazing on fungi on a fallen bough. An encounter with this handsome mollusc is always inspiring and we greet it like an old friend.

Nearby on a mossy stump, I am thrilled to spot the glint of a Snow-flea, another special resident and the first I have seen in over five years. Tubed temporarily for inspection, it too receives its due of worship. For some people, this is a new species; for us all, an emblem of these ancient woods. These two creatures, slug and scorpion-fly, have become synonymous with Wyre, woven into our collective experience of winter walks. Part of their attraction is their obscurity - they go unnoticed by nearly every casual visitor to the Forest, but for us are part of the genius loci, the spirit of these woods and they make us connoisseurs of their beauty and their surroundings. As I watch everyone celebrating these finds, it affirms what I've always known, that most of the pleasure of seeing them derives from the fact that we can share the experience. Suddenly today feels like a turning point. Wyre is working its magic.

The magic continues as some of us descend to a flush in the ravine at Seckley Wood where mosses and liverworts cover the rocks and rotting logs. The moss *Hookeria lucens* coats the stream banks with patches of its translucent fish-scale leaves. Two green Parrot Waxcaps are a surprise so deep into this dingle: usually we associate this fungus with old grassland. Helga Hall reveals an unfamiliar larva which she has found at the edge of the stream and which we can't identify on site. As we all know, one of the great pleasures of field trips is the research back at home when, with a mug of tea and a field guide/website to hand, we ferret away to confirm what we have found. Later I do just this and find out that the mystery larva is a young Giant Lacewing, a predator which prowls the margins of small streams and rivulets in woodland. It's the first I have seen and probably new to us all.

We've only been out for a few hours but it has been hugely enjoyable, rich in signature species and good companionship. It may be a cliché that getting out amongst nature is a great healer, but it is nevertheless true and today is proof of that. Norman Hickin knew this when he entitled his memoirs *Forest Refreshed*. After a year of absence from Wyre, that is exactly how I feel.



Parrot Waxcap *Gliophorus psittacinus*

Rosemary Winnall